

SPEECH
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CONGRESSIONAL HISPANIC CAUCUS INSTITUTE
CELEBRATING LATINA EXCELLENCE SERIES
WASHINGTON, DC
DECEMBER 12, 2023

Good afternoon! *Buenas Tardes*. It's a pleasure to be with all of you here today.

Thank you to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI) for the kind invitation to speak with you at the inaugural Celebrating Latina Excellence Series.

Many of you were long-time supporters of my nomination and I am thrilled to join you, a little over two months into the job, to say thank you for your support and to talk about how my professional experience across the telecom and technology space and my lived experience as a Latina American influences my perspective in this role and my priorities as Commissioner.

First, a little bit of context. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC or Commission) is the country's expert agency on communications technology, and I find it grounding to stop and think about how communications technology impacts just about every aspect of modern life for every community, across generations, and at every income level.

We rely on a broadband connection for work, education, medical care, entertainment, banking, buying groceries and goods, and even getting dinner delivered. If your friends and family live across the world, you likely rely on digital connectivity to communicate with them. When they apply for a job, they likely do it online. When they apply for a scholarship, to college, or to professional school, they do that online.

Having access to broadband internet service opens doors to opportunity. In contrast, not having access is like a locked door to the future.

Communications technology fuels economic growth and enables innovations that improve our quality of life. At its core, the FCC's fundamental mission is seizing the opportunity of the digital age, while mitigating the challenges.

This work is broad, and it ranges across many areas. For example, we help schools and libraries afford the broadband internet services they need to educate young minds. We evaluate wireless devices like wi-fi routers and ensure that wireless towers comply with environmental rules. We also provide low-income families with a discount on their monthly internet bill, which helps ensure the massive investment in our nation's broadband infrastructure closes the digital divide instead of becoming stranded.

We convene stakeholders to explore emerging issues like the promise and challenges of Artificial Intelligence. And we license spectrum for commercial uses that range from broadcasting to mobile broadband to satellite launches, including fostering the exciting field of lunar communications. Let me pause to let that sink in. The FCC is looking at licensing spectrum for commercial use on the moon. How cool is that?

I have been working in telecommunications for close to 30 years and understand the importance of balancing policies that protect the public interest with those that promote competition and innovation. As a result of hard work, persistence, and some luck, I have had the privilege of working on transformational rulemakings at the Commission, standing up the First Responder Network Authority (commonly known

as FirstNet), representing the interests of some of our country's largest and most innovative corporations, and representing the United States in international spectrum negotiations.

One thing my experience has taught me is that companies hate regulation...that is until they want it.

Yes, it is funny, but it is also true and not surprising. I am a firm believer in the power of competition to drive innovation that improves services and lowers prices for consumers. I believe that a vibrant, strong, and competitive telecommunications and media marketplace that promotes U.S. prosperity can also meet the needs of all consumers.

But competition only works when the market works. And when the market fails, there are public policy goals to be considered and prioritized that require government action. This convergence of public and private action is necessary to ensure innovations benefit consumers and is why the majority of what we do can be viewed as public-private partnerships.

A timely example of this is pole attachments. Sounds exciting, right? Did you know that utility poles – you know the ones on the side of the road, made out of wood – are a critical piece of infrastructure for delivering broadband to homes, especially in rural areas? They are. Multiple companies attach their equipment – be it power lines, fiber, coaxial cables, wireless transmitters like small cell antennas – to these poles, making them very important real estate. But utility poles are privately owned and managed.

Now, pole owners might argue they should be allowed to establish their own processes and simply allow the market to set the best rates for businesses that want to attach equipment. However, there really is no competitive market for utility poles, there are not multiple companies in the same area that own and lease them – they are expensive to install and maintain, they require securing local government permits to access public rights of way, and they involve a multitude of safety and environmental concerns. Given these conditions and recognizing the opportunity for public-private collaboration, it is important for government to step in to harmonize interests.

At the Commission's meeting tomorrow, we are going to consider an item related to accessing poles, driven by the public policy goal to build the infrastructure necessary to deploy broadband to consumers.

And our role is balancing the interests Congress directs us to protect.

I understand that the right level of regulation, be it light touch, heavy handed, or something in between, reflects the circumstances before us. And specific facts matter a lot.

I think a lesser known but great example of transformational regulatory action by the FCC is mandatory de-tariffing. Younger members in the audience here may not know what a telephone service tariff is or that there was a time when calling someone out of state was a lot more expensive than calling someone in your state. Yes, the cost of calling someone varied by distance – and no, there was no texting back then.

A tariff is a contract filed with the government that dictates the terms and conditions between a common carrier with its customers. For example, a company that offered long-distance calls would file with the FCC a document outlining the cost, terms, and conditions of that service to consumers. Tariffing was a method to control how much companies could charge driven by the public policy goal to ensure fair rates for consumers. But tariffing turned into a major impediment to competitive markets.

The Commission, across decades and administrations, acted to mandatorily de-tariff emerging and *competitive* markets because it became clear that heavy handed price controls in a competitive market do

not benefit consumers. And proof of the success of de-tariffing is that most of the younger people in this very room have never thought about the cost of making a long-distance call.

I have worked on all perspectives on Commission rulemakings, and I bring this experience to bear when I am considering a proposed Commission action. From the government's side, I understand the importance of the public policy goals we are entrusted to implement and the need to consider the costs and benefits of our rules. From my private sector roles, I understand that implementing rules may not be as straightforward as it appears or may have unintended consequences. And it is the job of the private sector to explain that to us. And from my public interest engagement and personal experience as a Latina American, I understand that the industry we regulate impacts the daily lives of consumers.

Over the past two months, I have thought a lot and talked about the impact of FCC action on consumers.

The key principles I think about here are intentionality, trust, and empowering consumers through engagement.

Intentionality is important. By that I mean delineating clearly the problem we are trying to solve, approaching it with an open mind to all solutions and acting with purpose. I believe this is what is required to eliminate digital discrimination of access as Congress directed us to do in the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Infrastructure Act).

President Biden and a bipartisan Congress did a lot of great work in the Infrastructure Act. Building on the substantial work already underway at the Commission on broadband mapping to analyze the digital divide, the Infrastructure Act provided significant investment to fund needed deployment and it tackled affordability with the Affordable Connectivity Program. This is amazing. On top of all that good work, the Infrastructure Act also directed the Commission to "prevent" and "eliminate" digital discrimination of access. That is one of the last pieces of the digital divide puzzle that we have been asked to bring to the table.

At a high level, we are directing Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to sharpen their pencils and employ intentionality in their broadband deployment decisions. We want them to consider whether how they deploy, sell, and provide broadband services to the protected classes – those most often on the wrong side of the digital divide – has a discriminatory impact. Universal broadband access is essential to modern life, and we are requiring that this be top of mind when planning, building, and delivering networks, not an afterthought.

Trust. Consumer trust is so important. Building trust between government and businesses and historically underserved communities is challenging. As we take actions with the goal of benefitting consumers, we need to be aware that actions that undermine trust can prevent us from reaching our goals.

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is such a good example of the role that building trust plays in reaching our goals and also how breaking trust can potentially be devastating. Under the Chairwoman's leadership, the Commission stood up a grant program for ACP outreach and gave grants to 244 trusted local organizations and established a partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

My first month on the job I got to see firsthand how our outreach grantees are making a difference when I visited the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation in Los Angeles and met the *promotores* (community outreach representatives) that enroll eligible community members in the ACP. Through efforts to meet consumers where they are, in their neighborhoods and through trusted partners, the

Commission has stood up the largest broadband connectivity program in history. Over 22 million low-income households are able to access this critical service.

But as funding runs out around April of next year, we cannot lose sight of the loss of trust that will result if 22 million low-income households lose this support. Very soon the process to notify households that this critical assistance is going away will start. There will be stress and confusion and a trust rupture that may not be repaired. And many families will have to choose between paying for broadband or other necessities like food, electricity, or rent.

I heard about this last week at a *cafecito* I held with national Tribal organizations. The organizations explained that ACP not only enables consumers to afford broadband but also supports broadband networks on Tribal Lands as the ACP is a major component of Tribal ISPs' business plans.

To put it starkly, trust in the bipartisan public-private partnership to address the digital divide will be shaken if the ACP is not funded going forward.

The key broadband pieces of the Infrastructure Act, funding for deployment, funding ACP to ensure affordability, and the requirement to prevent and eliminate digital discrimination of access, combined with the broadband map, have provided the needed funding and tools to allow us to work in partnership with the private sector to deploy infrastructure and provide services to eliminate the digital divide. That is what is at risk.

And remember that the reason government stepped in with funding to partner with private industry is that universal broadband access is essential to participation in today's society, economy, and civic life. As we move forward, nurturing that hard-earned consumer trust will be key.

I also want to empower consumers through engagement. I don't expect consumers to keep up with the decisions of the FCC and why we are relevant to their lives. Most consumers are too busy unless there is something wrong. And they are trusting us to do our job.

In this role, I am focused on understanding how the FCC's actions impact consumers and where outreach, education, and engagement can make a difference in their lives.

So, I would like to talk about some of the issues that matter and how I am engaging on them and extend an invitation to reach out to me and my staff on issues that matter for you and the communities you represent.

On protecting consumers, the Commission takes action across many sectors. For example, we just passed an order implementing the Safe Connections Act, in which Congress directed us to require providers to separate the phone line of a survivor of abuse from the phone line of their abuser. This matter deeply affects two communities facing specific situations of abuse – farmworker women and indigenous women.

Farmworker women report higher rates of Intimate Partner Violence than the general population. Additionally, farmworker women are at particular risk for sexual harassment, assault, and rape on the job. Also, alarming is the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People across our nation. A study found that over 84% of American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence in their lifetimes. And according to the CDC, murder is among the top ten leading causes of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women. These statistics are devastating.

Being able to separate from an abuser without losing your ability to communicate is life changing. I am proud to be part of implementing a solution to this problem at the FCC.

As a Commissioner, I look for opportunities to use my platform to focus attention on the challenges historically underserved communities face, to share pertinent information with these communities and to seek opportunities to collaborate.

One of the ways in which I have begun to share information is by providing some of my statements at Open Commission meetings *en Español*.

With the Safe Connections Act item, I wanted to ensure that farmworker women could learn about this important action in their own language, and also to invite organizations that serve them to help us get the word out. I don't do this for every item. I think deeply about how each item will impact consumers and whether sharing a statement in Spanish can enhance our Agency's ability to reach them in a meaningful way.

Another issue that is on my mind is Media Disinformation. The first meeting I took with stakeholders was with national Latine organizations, including CHCI. There, several organizations expressed their concern with misinformation finding its way to Latine communities.

I want to make clear that I hear you. But I also need to make clear that this is a very complicated issue without simple answers or actions that can counter it.

The FCC cannot dictate content or in any way censor or infringe on the First Amendment rights of individuals or the press. This includes a broadcaster's selection and presentation of news or commentary.

I am listening and open to ideas, including ideas about how to promote media and digital literacy among Latine and Spanish-speaking communities. For example, initiatives like YouTube's "Hit Pause" campaign, which educates viewers on how to identify common manipulation tactics that spread misinformation. My interest in educating consumers on how to identify reliable news sources is grounded in the FCC's responsibility to the Constitution and First Amendment law. And I am here to work with you on this important and complex issue.

Finally, I would like to close with highlighting the importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, particularly to find the next Latine Commissioner, because we cannot let another 20 years pass by.

I have been participating in DEI efforts throughout my career. And it has been some of the most fulfilling and important work I've done, not only to achieve the goals of the job, but to open the way for unsung leaders with a wealth of skills. I firmly believe that we are better equipped to achieve our goals when we bring a diversity of perspectives to the table to find and implement solutions.

Today is so special because I am surrounded by *comunidad* – supporters of Latine leadership and talented young Latine leaders. Look around this room. Among us may be the next Latine FCC Commissioner, and I look forward to sharing with them what I have learned.

Thank you again for your support, I look forward to working with you over the course of my tenure in this role.